

Barriers to Japanese Student Mobility

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The benefits of studying abroad during a students' time at university are widely reported. Students gain more than just language skills as a sojourn overseas can contribute to their personal development, global understanding and engagement, future educational choices, and employment prospects. For example, study abroad helps to develop students' intercultural adaptability and sensitivity, open-mindedness, patience, flexibility, and cultural-self-awareness and openness to diversity (Ismail, Morgan, & Hayes, 2006; Root & Ngampornchai, 2013; Williams, 2005; Zimmermann & Neyer, 2013). Students return home ready to become more civically involved, and often choose education and career goals as a result of experiences gained abroad (Paige, Fry, Stallman, Josić, & Jon, 2009).

A recent large-scale study into the impacts of study abroad has demonstrated that these benefits also hold true in Japan (Yokota et al., 2016). Japanese who have studied overseas experience many positive effects and improvements in abilities compared to those who have not studied abroad. Those who have studied abroad have changed perceptions and values, and they have improved competence in areas such as resilience to stress, flexibility and leadership. Study abroad is useful for career planning for many and leads to a higher annual income, with study abroad alumni in Japan more likely to be in executive or managerial positions than their peers. About 60% of study abroad alumni surveyed felt that their overseas experiences were valued during the job recruiting process, and more than 60% of those who obtained an undergraduate degree overseas use the knowledge and skills gained in their current job. The survey also found that those with study abroad

experience generally had a higher satisfaction with life than those who had not studied outside of Japan.

The Japanese government and higher education institutions (HEIs) see increasing study abroad participation as an important goal. Since 2011, the Ministry of Education Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has generously and continuously increased scholarships for university students studying abroad (see Aruga, 2013; The Embassy of Japan in the UK, n.d.). Study abroad is a key component of strategies to develop global *jinzai* (globally competent graduates). For example, MEXT's 2012 Project for Promotion of Global Human Resource Development funded projects at 42 universities which aim to increase the number of students who will receive overseas academic credits and reach a target number of globally competent graduates. Increased study abroad will also help to boost Japanese HEIs in international university rankings, a policy goal which was announced in the government's 2013 Re-vitalization Strategy and implemented with the introduction of MEXT's 2014 Top Global University Project.

Such policy focus has encouraged more Japanese students to venture overseas in recent years. Figures place 69,869 Japanese students abroad in 2013, an increase from a low of 57,501 in 2011 (MEXT, 2015; Japan Student Services Organization [JASSO], 2015). However, these figures may not be sufficient to keep Japan on track to meet the goal of doubling student mobility to 120,000 outbound students by 2020, as laid out in the government's 2013 Re-vitalization Strategy (Prime Minister of Japan and his Cabinet, 2013 p. 23). Here at Meiji University, we also have ambitious student mobility goals, and aim to send 4,000 students to study abroad annually by 2023 (Meiji University, nd.). During the 2015 academic year, 1,252 Meiji University students participated in study abroad programs (Meiji University, 2016).

Given Japan's plans for increasing student mobility, it is advantageous to understand what might keep students from participating in study abroad programs. In an earlier article (Bradford, 2015), I examined Japanese student perspectives towards study abroad, concluding that many Japanese students aspire to study abroad in order to improve

their language skills, learn about new cultures, and gain new perspectives. However, that article did not report on the barriers that university students face in relation to studying abroad. This article assumes that responsibility and explores the barriers to study abroad faced by Japanese students. Specifically, it reviews analysis and empirical evidence from earlier studies before presenting data from Meiji University students regarding the barriers that they perceive might prevent them from studying abroad.

Barriers to study abroad

The catalog of barriers to study abroad described in research studies is long. Recent articles regarding European student participation in the Erasmus program which have reviewed the literature (Beerkens, Souto-Otero, de Wit, & Huisman, 2016; Souto-Otero, Huisman, Beerkens, de Wit, & Vujić, 2013) list such things as lack of awareness about study abroad opportunities and insufficient knowledge of academic prerequisites, financial costs and concerns about eligibility for loans, lack of recognition of time spent abroad and non-availability of credit transfer, differences in the structure of the academic year and inflexible curricula that cannot accommodate a study abroad period, lack of foreign language skills and the requirement to study in a language other than English, lack of information about host-country living conditions and problems related to accommodation in the host country, administrative matters, and a general uncertainty about the benefits of study abroad. After analyzing a large-scale study of Erasmus participants and non-participants, these researchers found that financial concerns and worries about disruptions to studies are the strongest barriers to Erasmus participation. Personal barriers, such as home-ties and lack of interest, are very present for non-participants, whereas participants and those strongly considering participation are more aware of administrative problems and education system incompatibilities. This suggests that students first think about personal aspects before considering other potential difficulties concerning study abroad.

The barriers identified in the European context are also apparent in Japan. In 2011, Ota published one of the most comprehensive analyses of factors which may hinder overseas study for Japanese students, he listed 15 factors, dividing them into those affecting short-term exchange students and those affecting long-term degree-seeking students. These are summarized in Table 1 below. Ota's analysis places financial concerns in the domain of degree-seeking students, and highlights issues of

Table 1 Factors affecting potential study abroad students

Factors affecting potential short-term study abroad students
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students face pressures to begin job-hunting increasingly early in their university careers and do not have time for going abroad • Japanese employers do not value overseas experience • Credit transfer systems are underdeveloped in Japan • Japan has been late to develop international exchange programs and so has fewer compared to other countries • The new TOEFL test established in 2006 introduced difficult integrated elements, in addition to a speaking section, skills which have proven difficult for many Japanese students.
Factors affecting potential overseas degree-seeking students
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Declining birthrate in Japan • Rising tuition fees at universities in English-speaking countries • Japan's seniority-based pay system does not incentivize study above bachelor level • An increase in PhDs awarded in Japan (especially in arts) means that future researchers do not have to go overseas to earn a degree. In addition, apprenticeship conventions in Japan discourage time abroad • Financial support for study abroad is relatively low • It is difficult for students to envision staying overseas for the long-term, and in the short-term, a Japanese degree is better for securing employment in Japan's lifetime employment system
Factors affecting all potential study abroad students
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk-averse thinking coupled with a lack of clear benefits to studying overseas • Over-protective parenting due to a declining birthrate • Japan is a convenient and comfortable country to live in, there is not much incentive to put oneself into challenging situations

Source: adapted from Ota, 2011

disruptions to studies, credit transfer and language issues as concerning short-term study abroad students. It does not draw attention to home-ties as defined in Europe, i.e., family and personal relationships and work commitments (see Beerkens et al., 2016; Souto-Otero et al., 2013). This may be due to the comparatively few non-traditional students enrolled in Japanese universities, and therefore fewer students with family and work responsibilities. However, personal barriers are actualized in the factors pertaining to contentment with life in Japan and risk-averse thinking, barriers which Ota ascribes to both categories of study abroad student.

Much has been written about Japanese students' contentment with the status quo, aversion to risk, and waning interest in overseas study. Data from international sources and compiled by MEXT show that the number of Japanese students studying abroad at HEIs stood at a high of 82,945 in 2004, before falling to 57,501 in 2011 (Japan Student Services Organization [JASSO], 2015). Media commentaries were quick to link this decline to *uchimuki*, or inward, tendencies of Japanese youth (see for example, Dujarric, 2012; Fukushima, 2010). Japanese students are purported to see little value in leaving safe, comfortable, and affluent Japan in order to go abroad and engage in unfamiliar or difficult situations (Fukushima, 2010; Ota, 2011; see also Lassegard, 2013 for a discussion of student disinterest in overseas study). However, as I have previously highlighted in this journal (Bradford, 2015), close examination of empirical reports into study abroad shows Japanese students to be positively oriented towards time overseas (see Asaoka & Yano, 2009; Bradford & Fujimoto, 2014; Lassegard, 2013). A 2014 large-scale British Council study found that Japanese student sentiment towards overseas study is positive, with the number of students expressing interest in studying abroad almost equal to those who want to study exclusively in Japan (45% positive responses). Japanese student sentiment is more favorable than that of their counterparts in the United Kingdom (37% positive responses) and the United States (44% positive responses) (British Council, 2014). The British Council study concludes that for Japanese students to be so optimistic about study abroad when it is not

clear whether Japanese employers value university graduates with such experience is telling of their outward state of mind. If Japanese students are risk-averse, it is in the sense that Aspinall (2009; 2013) describes when he applies Beck's *risk society* paradigm (Beck 1992) and states that students are *risk managers*, weighing the costs and benefits of a sojourn abroad.

The barriers to a period of study abroad for Japanese students, according to empirical studies, are more likely to be financial or related to perceived insufficiencies in foreign language skills. The British Council's (2014) nationwide study of 2,004 students counted 1,112 students who were unsure or did not want to go overseas, 41% of whom thought that study abroad was too expensive and 51% of whom said that they did not have good enough foreign language skills. They stated that financial support, language courses, or evidence that study abroad might improve their chances of getting a good job in Japan might incentivize them to pursue overseas study. Similar results were gathered in two earlier large-scale studies. In 2009, Benesse (2012) conducted a survey of 2,150 Japanese who had studied abroad within the previous ten years and 206 Japanese who had shown interest, but not studied abroad, and found that both groups of people had regarded money (36%, 68%) and language skills (31%, 40%) to be the top disincentives to study abroad. Likewise, JASSO (n.d.) surveyed 20,223 Japanese aged between 20 and 40 in 2012 and found that of 1,382 people who had abandoned plans to study overseas, 64% named economic problems, 25% cited family circumstances, and 21% listed language skills as barriers to study abroad. When only data submitted by students were analyzed, economic problems remained the top barrier (80%, $n=65$), and language skills moved up into second place (25%).

Smaller studies echo these results. Lassegard (2013) discovered that of 146 students who wanted to study abroad but were unable to, 64% cited a lack of money, and 35% felt that their language ability was too low (students could select more than one response). Similarly, Asaoka and Yano (2009) found that of 61 students who wished to study abroad, but had never done so because of difficulties, 93% stated that

those difficulties were financial. 43% of those students were worried about not being able to graduate within the standard four-year degree timetable, and 23% were concerned about health problems. In a study of both students who had and had not previously studied abroad ($n=39$), Bradford and Fujimoto (2014) found students to be most worried about their language ability (59%) and finances (41%). These pragmatically-grounded findings indicate that Japanese students weigh the costs of overseas study when making a decision to participate in study abroad programs, but at the same time, perhaps need extra support and guidance vis-à-vis confidence in their own language abilities.

Method and Results

The Faculty of Business Administration at Meiji University has experienced some difficulties in recruiting students for its overseas programs, and so this study was designed to provide information for program leaders in the hope that the results could help boost the numbers of students choosing to go abroad. Students studying in the Faculty of Business Administration between April 2014 and June 2015 were invited to complete an online dual-language Japanese and English survey. All students invited to complete the survey had elected to enroll in internationally-orientated courses delivered through the medium of English, or were taking such courses as part of an internationally-orientated academic track. It is therefore assumed that the results of this study highlight the opinions of students somewhat positively inclined towards an experience abroad, and that the barriers that many of the students identify may not be significant enough to keep them from participating in a study abroad program.

Forty-six students completed the survey, 52% were male and 48% were female. The majority (74%) were enrolled in their first year at university, others were second-year students. Twenty-nine students reported TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) scores ranging from 430 to 805 out of a total of 990, with a median score of 635. TOEIC scores are used by almost 800 companies in Japan to

assess the English proficiency of their new recruits. In 2014, the average recruit had a score of 500 (ETS, 2014). The reference mark to indicate English proficiency among new recruits is 625 (ETS, 2013). The students in this study therefore display better-than-average English skills for Japanese graduates. TOEIC scores are, however, not considered by university admissions processes as suitable indicators of ability to study abroad.

The students had had varying amounts of previous international experience. Fifty-nine percent had travelled outside of Japan before, and seven students (15%) had lived abroad in the past, with two of those having spent more than five years overseas. Only four students (9%) had studied abroad in the past. Three of these students had completed English as a second language (ESL) and academic programs of less than one month in Australia, the UK, and USA, and one student had spent between three and six months enrolled in an English as a second language in the Philippines. Two of the students who had studied abroad had also previously lived abroad (for periods of less than two years). Of those who had never studied abroad ($n=42$), 88% (37 students) indicated that they would like to. Only five of the students surveyed (11%, $n=46$) indicated that they had no interest in studying abroad.

The students ($n=46$) were asked to select, from a list of eight, the worries they have, or had, before studying abroad. This list was compiled based on extensive interviews with students considering a sojourn abroad.¹ Students could select as many worries as they felt appropriate and they could also write in their own answer. This resulted in 115 separate responses (Table 2). The most frequently cited worry was *low language ability* (67%). This was followed by *financial*, with half (50%) of the students choosing this option. Students were also worried about the academic level of the host university and more general host country issues related to living abroad. Concerns related to the job search and future career ranked next, before worries about home university administration. Two students selected *other*, one listing lack of time to study abroad and the other concerns over food in the host country.

Table 2 Worries before study abroad ($n=46$)

Worry	Number of responses	Percentage of students
Low Language ability	31	(67.4)
Financial	23	(50.0)
Host university issues related to the academic level	19	(41.3)
Host country issues related to life in that country	17	(37.0)
Job-hunting	9	(19.6)
Future career trade-off	6	(13.0)
Home university issues such as credit transfer and length of study	6	(13.0)
Health	2	(4.3)
Other	2	(4.3)
Total Responses	115	

Students most often selected three worries, frequently citing low language ability, host university academic issues, and host country life issues together. The students who indicated that they do not want to study abroad did not select noticeably more worries than did the other students. One of the students who had no interest in study abroad selected six worries, two selected four worries, one selected two worries, and one selected one worry (Table 3). Of particular note is that all of

Table 3 Worries before study abroad — students who do not want to study abroad ($n=5$)

Worry	Number of responses	Percentage of students
Low Language ability	3	(60.0)
Financial	5	(100.0)
Host university issues related to the academic level	3	(60.0)
Host country issues related to life in that country	3	(60.0)
Job-hunting	1	(20.0)
Future career trade-off	0	
Home university issues such as credit transfer and length of study	1	(20.0)
Health	0	
Other	1	(20.0)
Total Responses	17	

the students who do not want to study overseas cited financial concerns. The student who was worried about food was not interested in going overseas.

The students were then asked to indicate their top worry from the same list. As might be expected, low language ability (39%) and financial worries (30%) came out on top (Table 4). Issues related to the job search and future career ranked near to the bottom. The student who indicated they had no time for study abroad listed that reason as their number one concern. Of the students who do not want to go abroad, three selected financial reasons as their top worry, one listed language ability and one chose issues related to life in the host country.

To help gauge if students may be worried unnecessarily, they were asked about their knowledge of study abroad services offered by their university. When asked if there is any financial help for studying abroad via their university, 42 students answered with 32 (76%) replying “yes”, and 10 (24%) replying “don't know” (Figure 1). Varying amounts of financial support are available to students, either from their university or from the government, depending on the study abroad program chosen. Students believed that transfer of credits earned overseas back to their home university was possible (Figure 2), with only 5% of students believing this process to be difficult. In fact, many of the

Table 4 Top worry before study abroad ($n=46$)

Worry	Number of responses	Percentage of students
Low Language ability	18	(39.1)
Financial	14	(30.4)
Host university issues related to the academic level	7	(15.2)
Host country issues related to life in that country	2	(4.3)
Job-hunting	0	
Future career trade-off	1	(2.2)
Home university issues such as credit transfer and length of study	2	(4.3)
Health	1	(2.2)
Other	1	(2.2)
Total Responses	46	

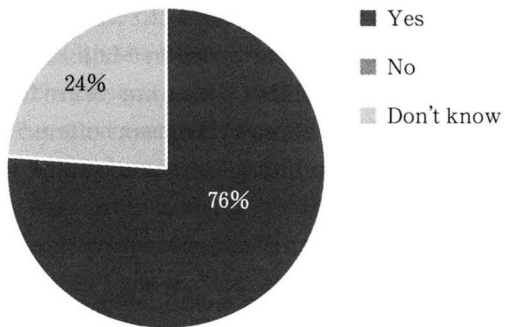


Figure 1 Awareness of financial support
(*n* = 42)

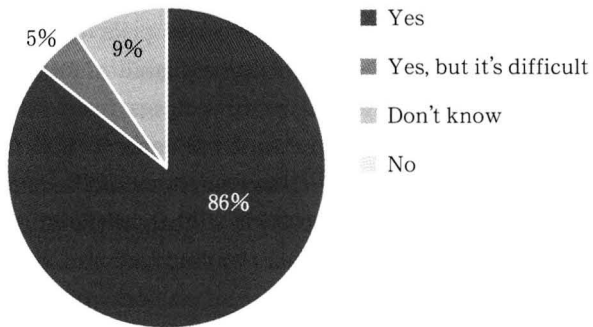


Figure 2 Awareness of credit transfer of credits
(*n* = 42)

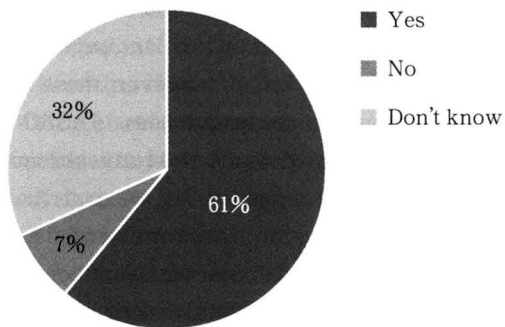


Figure 3 Awareness of pre-departure support
(*n* = 41)

short-term study abroad programs available to these students do not require credit transfer as credits are awarded by Meiji University. More than half of the students indicated that they were aware that support is offered to students before study abroad. Programs offered and credited through these students' home faculty all offer such support.

Discussion and Implications

Similarities with previous studies and methodological considerations

The results describe a group of Meiji Faculty of Business Administration students who are interested in studying abroad and have a good idea of the types of support and services offered to them by their university. When asked about their worries prior to venturing overseas, students most often cited low language ability, followed by financial concerns. These results jibe with findings from other empirical studies carried out in Japan (e.g., Asaoka & Yano, 2009; British Council, 2014; Jasso, n.d.; Lassegard, 2013). However, it should be noted that each of the studies referred to here survey a slightly different demographic when asking questions about barriers to study abroad.

In the current survey, the majority of students indicated that they would like to study abroad, yet are worried about language and finances. There is no information as to whether these barriers will ultimately prevent study abroad, although for the students who did not want to go overseas, financial worries were the most salient. The British Council's (2014) students also ranked low language ability followed by finances as barriers to study abroad, however, these students were all unsure of or did not want to study overseas. JASSO (n.d.) found that students who had abandoned plans to study abroad most often chose finances, followed by language ability as contributing factors. Asaoka and Yano (2009) surveyed students who wanted to go overseas, but had difficulties in doing so, and found financial concerns to be the biggest worry. Similarly, Lassegard (2013) asked his question to students who wanted to study abroad, but were unable to. He found that finances were of more concern than language ability for his students.

The small sample sizes of most of these studies prevent the drawing of firm conclusions, and as Beerkens et al. (2016) point out “a link between perceiving a barrier and actual decision not to participate is often ambiguous and not necessarily causal” (p. 18). In addition, any survey answer may be a retrospective justification for a decision about study abroad that was never actually a conscious decision. That said, one might surmise that Japanese students are worried about their language level, but that it is finances that actually hinder participation in study abroad programs.

Worries about language abilities

The students in this study demonstrated higher-than-average English proficiency levels when compared to new recruits nationally, and all were enrolled in English-medium classes. Yet, their main worries about study abroad concerned their language ability. This may be a reflection of the European findings which suggested that students first think of personal barriers when initially considering study abroad (see Beerkens, Souto-Otero, de Wit, & Huisman, 2016; Souto-Otero, Huisman, Beerkens, de Wit, & Vujić, 2013). It is telling that students frequently selected the barriers *low language ability*, *host university academic issues*, and *host country life issues* together. This may indicate that despite students' openness to an overseas experience, they are apprehensive about a new environment. Furthermore, of the three questions about study abroad support and services, the Meiji University students gave the most mixed response to the question about pre-departure training, with 32% not knowing if such training is offered (see Figure 3). Taken with the concerns about language and host-nation issues, this suggests that for these students, Meiji University could assume more responsibility for making students feel prepared to study overseas. This could be in the form of more functional language classes, tailored to the study abroad experience, and/or study abroad information sessions with study abroad program alumni in attendance. Semester-long courses focusing on preparing students to go overseas have been successful in raising awareness of and calming apprehension about study abroad at

other Tokyo universities (Professor, Tokyo area university, personal communication, May 2015).

Worries about finances

In the current study, the tangible issue of finances appears to be a real barrier to study abroad. Many students are concerned about the cost of studying overseas, and all the students who stated that they did not want to go abroad cited finances as an issue. For these students, money worries may have influenced their attitudes towards study abroad, or alternatively, money may be seen as an acceptable reason to cite for not wanting to go overseas. In his analysis Ota (2011) cited high fees as an issue more likely to affect long-term degree-seeking students than short-term students. The Meiji students in this study, by virtue of their status as enrollees in a Japanese university, were most likely envisioning study abroad as a short-term activity, yet are concerned about finances. They are aware that scholarships are available for studying abroad (see Figure 1), but it is unclear if they know how much support is available, or how they can apply for it. In financial year 2014, the Japanese government provided 6,184 million yen, reaching 20,000 students, for short-term study abroad. This was more than 11 times the amount that was available in 2009 (The Embassy of Japan in the UK, n.d.). These efforts to facilitate study abroad are admirable, but, as yet, seem to have made little impact on the psyche of Japanese students, particularly as finances appear as a sizeable barrier in all of the empirical studies reviewed, including in the more recent surveys.

Worries about job search and future career

Much media and policy attention has in recent years focused on the potential constraints of Japan's hiring practices on study abroad. Traditionally, Japanese graduates enter a company upon graduation and remain with that company for much of their working life. Accordingly, a protracted hiring process became necessary to ensure good fit between the company and recruit. During this period, students spend much of their time attending job fairs, preparing resumes, and

attending exams and interviews. The hiring season conventionally started at the beginning of a students' senior year in university, however, to gain a competitive edge in recruiting the best and brightest, companies began to push the hiring cycle forward and students have been forced to spend the second half of their third year at university enmeshed in the job search, thus leaving little time for study abroad. This was not an important consideration for the students in this current study. These students were all business majors, and so perhaps attuned to the benefits of international experience in the corporate world. Similar trends have also been reported in other studies in Japan. For example, the British Council (2014) reports only 3% of students surveyed as being worried about conflicts with the corporate recruitment cycle, and the law and business administration students in Lassegard's (2013) study ranked delayed graduation and job search difficulty at the bottom of their list of concerns. In an older study, Asaoka and Yano (2009) found their students to be more concerned about timely graduation and disadvantages in employment seeking activities (43% of students), leaving one to speculate that recent changes in the business world are making an impact.

An optimistic view of these results would suggest that recent efforts to adjust the hiring cycle to accommodate study abroad have had the desired effect. The Federation of Economic Organizations (Keidanren) has taken real steps to address the hiring problem, issuing updates to its annual guidelines for companies regarding student recruitment and selection. In 2007 for example, the recruitment season began in September of a student's third year, by 2011, Keidanren had called for companies to refrain from starting recruitment until December of students' third year, and the latest guidelines state that recruitment activities should not start earlier than March 1st directly prior to the start of the students' graduating year (Firkola, 2011; CULCON, 2013; Keidanren, 2015). Keidanren has also asked for companies to clearly announce their initiatives to recruit students who have studied abroad (Keidanren, 2016). Although Keidanren's guidelines are not enforceable, they are widely followed.

Conclusion

This article examines barriers that Japanese students face when considering study abroad. The empirical analysis revealed a group of students concerned about their language abilities and financial situation. These findings, although small-scale, reinforce those of previous research carried out in Japan and will provide evidence to aid those in charge of implementing study abroad programs at Meiji University. The approach taken by the current study, that of using student surveys to understand the obstacles that students face in relation to study abroad, is one from which much can be learned, and one which should be repeated and expanded upon. If popular rhetoric and analysis were the only viewpoints to be considered, one would be left thinking that Japanese students don't desire to seek out overseas experiences and are highly concerned about their job-search. While these concerns are real, empirical studies have in recent years indicated that students are open to study abroad and are not as concerned about fitting time abroad into their schedules as many believe.

Of course, student surveys alone cannot provide all of the evidence needed to eradicate barriers to study abroad. The barriers that students perceive are not always the ones that actually prevent them from participating in programs, and structured surveys encourage participants to think in terms of the choices offered to them in the survey. Surveys should be expanded upon with in-depth discussions with students about their decisions to participate or not participate in study abroad programs. Asaoka and Yano supplemented their 2009 survey with interviews, but in this era of rapid growth in student mobility, discussions with students should be ongoing. Two recent initiatives, the Global *Jinzai* 5000 Project and its sister *Ryugaku no Susume.jp* [invitation to study abroad] online community, are making great strides into helping us understand how a period spent studying overseas can impact Japanese graduates and in giving advice to prospective study abroad students. However, they do not examine barriers to study abroad and

large-scale qualitative examination of factors preventing students in Japan from venturing overseas remains a productive area for future study.

Note

- 1 With thanks to Michiyo Fujimoto of the Study Abroad Foundation for her work in compiling the list.

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